

Multiple Choice to Multiple Rubrics: One Teacher's Journey in Assessment

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Why am I doing this?" "How is this helping my students learn?" Years ago I began to ask myself these questions as I walked between the rows of students, quietly circling their answers in multiple-choice tests. Those questions, combined with a general dissatisfaction regarding the traditional methods of assessment that I was using, led me on a journey that has involved finding and using multiple types of assessments.

Where I Was

For me, assessment was originally something that occurred mostly at the end of a unit, with a few small quizzes and perhaps a project included within the unit. Tests were predominately "objective" multiple choice, true/false, and short answer questions. I would also include several short essays.

As I began to move toward a more constructivist and student-centered orientation to my teaching, the discrepancy between my teaching and assessment methods became more and more glaring. I teach seventh graders, and have increasingly dealt with conceptual learning using primary sources to develop the type of lessons where my students become investigators and thinkers.

I felt that it was necessary to have my assessment methods undergo a similar progression so that objective tests would not constitute the main assessment that I was using with students. I thus began using multiple types of assessment at multiple points during my units. I also wanted to make assessments a part of the learning experience for students as opposed to something that only occurred following a learning experience.

Where I Am

In altering my patterns of assessment, it was first necessary to decide what I wanted to include in those assessments. As a social studies teacher this was not difficult; I often had students take notes and complete projects. I would also assign "research papers" throughout the year. For this reason I decided that my assessments would grow from these three components:

- Written work (both creative and formal)
- Project work (both individual and group)
- Quizzes and tests

Over the past few years these three components of my assessment have been continually evolving and will, no doubt, continue to do so.

Writing Assessments: From Research Papers to I-Search Essays

Response Notebooks

As a classroom teacher, I have always believed in the importance of both formal and informal writing learning experiences. What I have altered somewhat is my view of how writing should occur. Writing can be an important learning tool as well as a means of assessment. Now I have students engage in some form of writing virtually everyday.

Every student keeps a spiral notebook and each lesson contains a number of student writing exercises. We often start class with some form of writing such as a sentence synthesis exercise. This strategy involves writing three or four words down from the previous day (such as “archaeology-artifacts-Iceman”), having the students put the words into a meaningful sentence, and discussing the students' sentences.

I also use *seed questions* (whenever a question comes up for a student, he or she writes it in the notebook). Subsequently, many of our classroom discussions just use the “seeds.” The notebooks also include free responses, frames (such as Venn diagrams), pictures, and so on. The student notebook has become, for me, an excellent assessment instrument that is used on a daily basis and graded with a checklist about every two weeks.

With the increased use of student notebooks, and the possibility of doing so much with them, I no longer have any use for worksheets—for which my students are eternally grateful. I am not interested in how well students can copy things down or transfer facts from a written page to a worksheet; I am interested in their learning and motivation. Worksheets tend to be didactic and call for lower order thinking. Response notebooks tend to be much richer and are so much more valuable in instruction and ongoing assessment.¹

The I-Search Essay

In addition to daily student work in their notebooks, I have moved to a form of essay called the “I-Search.” In this method, students are asked to develop the questions they would like to research and write about. They may use seed questions, previous lessons, or my suggestions, but all students pick the question into which they will delve more deeply.

Formal writing is important in education. Good writing—like good thinking, speaking, and listening—is always worth striving for. There is a precision to thought and language that, I feel, can best be exercised and improved in formal written projects. Students should exercise their command of written language as well as develop a sense of the art involved in writing. They should have the constant experience of putting thought and resources together to make thoughtful essays with words and ideas that are stated precisely. Although the daily writing previously described is important for this, so are formal writing projects that incorporate student choice and student questions.

Creative Writing with a Twist

In this type of writing assignment, I ask students to write about a factual event by imaginatively placing themselves into it. The form of writing could include, for example, a fictitious diary or journal entry, a newspaper account, a dialogue between characters (real or fictitious), a poem, or a comic strip. Whatever its form, the creative must mix with the actual.² For example, in my lesson on the archaeological find of the Iceman, I have students write themselves into the factual events surrounding the discovery and the subsequent theories and inferences about the Iceman's life.³

Making the Rubric

In using writing as both a learning tool and a means of assessment, I have found the creation of a rubric that students receive prior to the actual exercise to be essential. Originally I made rubrics, which are the established criteria for grading, using the general categories of what was minimally proficient, proficient, advanced, and so on (as is often recommended).

After writing and presenting rubrics several times, I found that my students wanted these terms related to letter and number grades as soon as they heard them. I decided that because their grades are what students relate to, I would use grades to design my rubrics. Because I make use of a point system, the rubrics that I present to students look something like this (assuming the paper or project was worth 25 points):

23-25 (A)

- criteria
- criteria
- criteria

20-22 (B)

- criteria
- criteria
- criteria

ETC.

Rubrics give students the established criteria to work toward, and seeing the point total and letter grade makes the rubric far more meaningful for my students. Using the rubric, I also let students know that if they wish to improve their grade, they can look at the criteria they achieved, check it against the established criteria for the higher grade, make their adjustments, and resubmit their paper. (I have found that it is helpful when handing the papers back to students to have the rubric stapled to the paper with written comments.)

Projects

For many teachers, project work has always been a hands-on mainstay of the social studies. As I altered the methods I used for assessment, the project work that I assigned my students changed as well. The first change was to move toward projects in which students exercise some degree of choice over what they work on, incorporating both their knowledge and higher order thinking about it. This meant the creation of more open-ended projects in which there were many possible choices. It also entailed the development of multiple rubrics.

Group and/or Individual Work

Experience has taught me that it is important to have both individual and group projects. When I do use a group project, I let students know up front that they will not be getting a group grade. The majority of students are very

happy to learn this. There is a fundamental issue of fairness whenever two students do equally well on an assessment task but receive different grades because of the work of other group members. Group grading also works against the important cooperative learning principle of individual accountability.

Differentiation

Students learn and progress in different ways. This notion, well accepted in education as it is, has profound implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In differentiation, the teacher begins with where the student is and works the curriculum and instruction in such a way as to help that student. Of course, this includes what are often referred to as “modifications” for the special education student; but, just as importantly, it includes modifications for the gifted student. I have found differentiated individual projects, with accompanying rubrics and checklists, an essential component of working with gifted students.

Tests and Quizzes

Do I still use traditional tests and quizzes? Absolutely, but through experience I have also altered these somewhat. Although I still use multiple choice questions, I try to create some that go beyond recall by asking students to do such things as compare, sort, and classify. With essay questions, I use more processing questions (compare, explain why) and offer choices as to what students may write on. In addition, I have recently begun asking students to select any topic they wish from the unit for one of the test essays. With regard to the grading of essay questions, I make my own small rubrics for each essay.

When test sheets are passed back to the students, we do not go over them question by question. Rather, I let the students know how many they got correct, and then give them the option of using their notebooks and other resources in order to go over their tests, find the mistakes, and correct them for an upgrade. Regarding quizzes, I have more small quizzes offering some student choice and utilizing processing questions.

Recommendations

The journey toward using multiple types of assessments is compatible with the move toward constructivist and engaging teaching. In my own journey, I became dissatisfied with my methods of assessment. I realized that I was not teaching just for recall, and that assessing just for recall was defeating. As my journey continues, I want to expand my repertoire to include more student self-assessment, portfolios, and student created rubrics. Based on my personal experiences in expanding assessment, here are some recommendations:

1. *Begin where you are.* Look at your current assessment and go from there. Take your current tests, for example, and write a few questions that ask students to interpret or process information. Add a student choice component into your essays. If you assign students a number of formal papers, consider purchasing some plastic crates and hanging folders, and have student begin building portfolios. Consider assigning open-ended projects several times a year. Start with what you are already doing and build.
2. *Develop and then expand your use of rubrics.* My experience has been that rubrics are essential, and that they are quite easy to create (you simply begin by visualizing what an exemplary project/paper would be like and explicitly state that criteria). They are important for the students in that they have the criteria to work toward. You will also find that when assignments are returned, there are few, if any, questions such as “why did I only get a B?” Students can also use the rubric to find where improvements are to be made, make them, and resubmit their work. Furthermore, as you begin using rubrics, you will find more and more uses for them.
3. *Search out professional readings on assessment as well as staff development opportunities.* I have attended a few

workshop sessions dealing with assessment, but basically I have been searching out articles and readings on assessment. Much good work has been done on assessment that you can benefit from. What is important is to take what you learn, work with it, adapt it, make it your own.

Intellectual work cannot be totally measured by traditional forms of testing, which often test little more than recall. We seek as social studies educators to help our students become critical thinkers, problem solvers, and decision makers. This is all to the good, as it is not likely that the thinking and advances of the future will be made by those who simply memorize well. Few of our students will be doing worksheets or bubbling answer sheets in their future. The journey toward constructivist teaching and authentic assessment is one that many social studies teachers have begun and will continue. It is a powerful journey.

Notes

1. For ideas regarding written work, strategies such as sentence synthesis and seed questions, and the use of notebooks, I recommend the following: B. Bower, J. Lobdell, and L. Swenson, *History Alive! Teaching Students in the Diverse Classroom* (Palo Alto, CA: Teachers' Curriculum Institute, 1999); M. Harmin, *Strategies to Inspire Active Learning* (Edwardsville IL: Inspiring Strategies Institute, 1993); and L. Havens, E. Maycumber, and C. Santana, *Project CRISS: Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies*. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1996).
2. Two resources that use similar creative writing strategies are the *History Alive!* and *CRISS* resources cited above.
3. Michael M. Yell, "The Time Before History: Thinking Like An Archaeologist," *Social Education* 68, 1 (January 1998).

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